

A few words on IWW organizing - Staughton Lynd

An article by Staughton Lynd on specific practices and contract clauses that he thinks Wobblies should support.

This is the last in a series of reflections on the IWW approach to workers whom it hopes to “organize.”

The first point is that history offers inadequate formulations of what the IWW is all about.

The formulation embodied in the name and in the Preamble to the 1905 IWW Constitution is that the IWW is an association of “industrial” rather than “craft” unionists. As I have argued, the 1930s proved the inadequacy of this perspective. John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers (UMW), was an autocratic president of an industrial union and passionately repressed radicals. As principal founder of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), Lewis sponsored the creation of a series of top-down unions in the rubber, automobile, steel, meatpacking and other industries. The Lewis model for CIO unions insisted that one union represent all the workers in a particular industry, and that the employer deduct union dues from their paychecks.

Within and without the UMW, Lewis also pushed a particular sort of union contract that included two clauses much desired by management: a clause prohibiting strikes and other disruptions of production during the life of the contract and a “management prerogatives” clause giving the employer the legal right to make all the big decisions about a workplace. Such a contract put in the hands of the employer sole authority to decide what the enterprise should produce, how many workers it needed and, above all, whether, over time, the enterprise should receive new capital investment and expand, or be shut down.

A contract that gives the boss the authority to make the big decisions and prevents workers from doing anything about those decisions by stopping work is not a contract to which any worker should ever consent. Almost every CIO contract contained (and contains today) both a no-strike and a management prerogatives clause. Wobblies were critical of such contracts and obtained the reputation of opposing all written agreements.

The point, however, was not that it is always wrong to write down an agreement, but, rather, that the agreements typical of unionism in the United States routinely contain curtailments of vital workers’ rights. It is the substance of these contracts, not the fact of a written contract, which the IWW and its members have rightly protested.

So, when a fellow worker asks, “What are you guys for, anyhow?” neither the idea of industrial unionism nor a critique of “workplace contractualism” really answers the question. The imaginary dialogue might go like this:

A fellow worker asks a Wob, “So what are you people all about?”

The Wob pulls out a copy of the paper and points to the Preamble on page 3.

His colleague says, “Yeah, I like the spirit of the thing, but we got an industrial union, and it stinks.”

Frustrated, the Wob responds: “Well, we don’t sign contracts.”

Fellow worker says: “In the first place, I heard about an IWW local across town that did sign a contract. And in the second place, isn’t it really a question of what’s in the contract, not whether you write stuff down?”

I am not a member of the IWW and am only a single voice. Obviously, it should be you, not I, who answer these critical and legitimate questions. An important beginning that I notice in the December 2012 *Industrial Worker* is that, in place of the Preamble written 107 years ago, you have set forth a new statement of principles. It is well-drafted and persuasive. Congratulations!

But I think it might also assist that inquisitive fellow worker if there were a set of specific practices and contract clauses that Wobblies could be expected to support. Here are some possible “planks” for such a “platform.” (I rather like this figure of speech. One takes one’s stand on a platform. It is solid, supportive. Planks are required to give it substance):

1. Above all, every individual worker and every group of workers must retain **the right to stop work at any time**. Nothing in the Wagner Act, the law that applies to an ordinary private sector workplace, requires a no-strike clause. Beginning with the first CIO contracts in 1937, unions have voluntarily surrendered this essential right for the life of the contract.
2. Contract clauses that prohibit strikes have also been interpreted to prohibit slowing work down. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) does not protect slowdowns. However, **slowdowns are essential** and workers must struggle to promote and protect this critical practice.
3. **Working to rule** (for instance, doing everything directed by the company safety manual in a dumb-bunny manner) is an important tool. The late Jerry Tucker made a valuable contribution with his inplant efforts at the Staley corn processing plant in the early 1990s and elsewhere. Remember, however, that Staley also proved that working to rule can be checkmated by a lockout.
4. Wobs need to develop **an egalitarian approach to layoffs** that protects what Stan Weir called “the family at work,” or more simply, solidarity. We should abandon a mechanical application of seniority in layoff situations that may have the result that older workers (often white and male) not only continue to work full time but may even work overtime, while newer hires (often minority and/or female) are put on the street with nothing.
5. **Internationalism is a very serious matter**. The Farmworkers under César Chávez informed the federal government of undocumented immigrants from Mexico so as to protect the jobs of Mexican Americans already in the United States. Teamsters and Steelworkers were in Seattle in 1999 so that Teamsters could oppose letting Mexican truck drivers across the Rio Grande, and Steelworkers could advocate, as they always do, a protective tariff on steel imports. We must work toward coordinated strike action that protects workers everywhere.
6. The American ruling class will export to other countries any form of work that is not, by its nature, tied to a particular location. The reason is simple: lower wages can be paid elsewhere. **We need to re-conceptualize the centrality of “service” industries** such as public

employment, work in hospitals and retirement facilities, home nursing, and trucking. Such work is the heartbeat of a community, and includes the things that people voluntarily do for each other in moments of crisis like Hurricane Sandy.

7. In general, immigrants from Latin America and other “underdeveloped” parts of the world bring with them to the United States a more sophisticated and deep-seated practice of solidarity than that which exists among Anglos. **All Wobs should learn Spanish.**

8. There can never be a justification of two- and three-tier wage scales for the same work. We must champion the old, old principle of **equal pay for equal work.**

9. When a worker is summoned to the office of a supervisor, every effort must be made to **make sure that one or more fellow workers accompany him or her.** The NLRB has gone back and forth as to whether non-union workers possess this right as a matter of law. We must try to assert it in practice, regardless.

10. Self-evidently, everything said in the foregoing specific suggestions finds its ultimate rationale in the idea of solidarity. In my experience, this idea is enormously attractive for many workers. The workplace, where we are legally vulnerable and must abandon the rights of citizenship when we punch in, may paradoxically become the place and time where we most fully experience that another world is possible.

I will very briefly conclude by proposing that Wobs, individually and collectively, address the question: What does it mean to organize, to “be an organizer”? Yes, I know that Joe Hill wrote to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “Don’t mourn for me; organize.” But what did this wandering songwriter and casual laborer mean by the word “organize”? Not, I think, what the organizer who works for a modern trade union means. The organizer for a mainstream union checks in at the motel, convenes an underground meeting of informal shop-floor leaders, decides how best to recruit potential voters, stages a “going public” day when union supporters display buttons and pass out cards... and then, the day after the election, checks out of the motel and leaves town. If the election has been lost, the organizer leaves behind rank-and-file workers whose union sympathies have been made known to the employer and who are therefore vulnerable to retaliation.

This is not what we should mean by “organizing.” In fact, I believe it would be helpful to leave the word “organizing” to others, and to describe what we try to do with a word first used by Archbishop Óscar Romero of El Salvador: “accompanying.” Accompanying means walking beside another person, each learning from the other.

It also means staying for a while. My wife and I have found that staying in one place for more than 35 years gives us an ability to be heard and to be useful. It helps, too, to come to a community with a skill to offer that other people feel that they need.

I won’t say any more about this here because it appears in a new book called “Accompanying,” published by PM Press in Oakland, Calif.

Solidarity forever!

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